

THAT DOES NOT COMPUTE:
UNPACKING THE FEMBOT IN AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

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PREFACE

In 2015, the critically-acclaimed independent film *Ex Machina* presented its nerd protagonist with the dilemma of whether he should help an attractive self-aware robot escape her creator's control. It's a compelling story that poses serious ethical questions about human desire and scientific responsibility, and the controversial ending subverts audience expectations with real artistry. And yet, a certain real-life nerd saw the film's promotional poster (**Figure 1**) and was irritated rather than intrigued. What popped into this movie-going consumer's mind was not the film's central question—what happens when an artificially created woman affirms her autonomy?—but rather, what scientific purpose could that garter and thong possibly have?

The beautiful female robot and her attractive combination of womanliness and machinery has been a staple since *Metropolis*, the classic 1927 German film. This film established a pattern for gendered representations of robots based through its onscreen treatment of male and female bodies. The film famously uses masses of laborers as a metaphor for the dehumanizing aspect of industry: men's bodies are fed into machines with assembly line efficiency. The woman's body, on the other hand, is literally mechanized as a crazed scientist transfers the image of a living woman onto the body of a feminine machine. ("Technophilia" 167) This female-embodied robot (or, fembot) is used to whip the masses into a sexual frenzy. This pairing of technology and "the destructive power of female sexuality" (George 164) is prevalent in nearly all fembot narratives.

Techno-erotic imagery has long been used as a selling point in science fiction (SF) and other media. A simple explanation for its prevalence is that historically, SF is considered a male-dominated field. Both in terms of writers and readers, much of SF assumes a hetero-male point of view. As a result, women are often stereotyped into one-dimensional roles in SF narratives: a damsel in distress, the frigid intellectual, or "at best, loyal little wives or mistresses of

accomplished heroes.” (Le Guin 208) Given the highly publicized advancements in artificial intelligence (Bostrom; Ford 2015) and a greater scientific understanding of the gender spectrum (Fausto-Sterling 2000) there is rich potential for SF film and television to imagine non-gendered scenarios, or at least play with the boundaries of gender more freely. While SF literature provides more room for non-traditional gender narratives and the mixing of genres, SF film and television appears to be caught in the medium-specific ideology of the male-gaze. (Mulvey 1975)

Despite the genre’s gender-bending possibilities, SF film and television relies on conventional treatments of gender that are typical to the film medium. The treatment of the female form onscreen is the most relevant to the fembot, as the visibility and shape of her body comprises most of her character. Virtually all fembot stories make sex the basis of interaction between men and women. These relations are not always negotiated the same way, and the variations amongst sexual configurations between men and fembots point to the ways sociohistorical change between the genders is both acknowledged and contained within a narrative.

While science and technology evolves and the line between man and machine is further eroded, fembot narratives continue to rely on the gender binary, anchoring a feminine presence within the boundary-blurring genre of a robot story. The fembot in American SF film and television is a totem of gender stability in a world that seems infused with catastrophe. First emerging amidst atomic age and Cold War hysteria, the fembot’s traditional sexuality is sustained through more modern fears of artificial intelligence. By tracing the genealogy of the fembot within the United States, from her predecessors in print media in the forties and fifties and through the trend of fembot narratives in the early millennium, this study will demonstrate

how the sexualized treatment of the fembot body has managed to sustain across decades of social and technological change.

CHAPTER 1 - CLASSIC FEMBOTS

The American fembot tradition of exaggerated femininity can be traced to the gender anxiety of the 1950's. In 1949, the Soviet Union detonated an atomic bomb and American society became infused with the fear of an imminent nuclear war. (Wolfe; Lawrence 13) This fear manifested in the culture at large, and the decade that followed is fondly and/or ironically remembered as an age of (desperately) wholesome conformity, identified by stringent heteronormativity and proscribed modes of gendered behavior. "Marriage and babies, in short, offered security and reassurance in a world still haunted by a genocidal world war and now faced with the real threat of nuclear annihilation." (Hamilton and Philips 18) The ideology of the "nuclear family" dictated that a strong domestic core would protect against the infiltration of Communist ideas in the populace and provide a bulwark against nuclear war with the Soviets.

The push for marriage and babies dovetailed with the need to lure white, middle-class women out of the workforce and into the home. In researching her groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan found that from 1949 onward women's magazines had made the turn from promoting independent women to promoting dependence on men and dedication to the home. (D. Halberstam 598) Outside employment indicated an interest in the masculine sphere, so a working woman was not marriage material. (D. Halberstam 590) Being a supportive mother and wife were promoted as the highest aspiration for white middle-class women.

The consumerist ideology of the 1950s was enabled by advances in advertising and marketing techniques. Suburban women were isolated and relied on women's magazines for instruction on living the new middle-class lifestyle, dictating their clothing choices, food habits and personal aspirations. (D. Halberstam 590-1) Coming out of WWII, American consumers felt guilty about the new abundance available to them. Advertisers learned to appeal to psychological

motives to persuade consumers that indulging in the latest domestic technology was an American right. (D. Halberstam 506-507) Writing at the beginning of the fifties and the onset of atomic age paranoia, media scholar Marshall McLuhan saw the consumerist-driven model of domesticity as a danger, capable of imbuing real harm on its adherents. Having spent time in the US as a college instructor, the Canadian McLuhan found that he did not understand anything about his students, so he set out to understand American media and culture. What he found was not encouraging, and his resulting work, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, a collection of print advertisements and McLuhan's scathing commentary, portends a catastrophic result to new consumerism:

The public may smile at the suggestion that it need be perturbed at being the target for a barrage of corn flakes or light bulbs. But this industrial ammunition has the character of exploding in the brain cortex and making its impact on the emotional structure of all society. (34)

McLuhan was concerned about powerful normalizing effect of new media, which provided an “unofficial education.” (Meggs xi) Mass media had replaced religion and education in disseminating and shaping ideology. (Meggs x) The onslaught of consumerist imagery through print and television advertising had the effect of turning people into automatons, lacking their own decision making processes. With the onset of Cold War hysteria, McLuhan felt that mass consumerism exploited human fears and scared men and women into technological contraptions to protect against imagined dangers. Admen use imagery that taps into a visceral anxiety in order to profit, and the result is a beleaguered public, prone to suggestion and looking for technological fixes for their anxieties.

The effect of this anxiety is gendered: men are overwhelmed by sexual imagery, becoming eternal spectators, while women frantically modify themselves to capture and keep male attention, becoming eternal spectacles. McLuhan spoke directly to the kitchen as the locus

for the advertised ideology. The burden is on women to subdue their ambitions and find enjoyment in conformity. The pattern he identifies for how women are addressed to in advertisements point to an ideal standardized woman. He focuses on the way the female body is used to stimulate the male consumer's mind—or encourage the female consumer to learn how to do so by modifying her own body and purchasing habits. All of the ads that address women in McLuhan's collection encourage them to play into male desire. In *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan establishes a theoretical prototype for the American fembot. The term “mechanical bride” refers to many things: the standardization of the female form, an overt concern for appearance, and eagerness to conform. Three of his selected ads are of particular relevance for the fembot, in how they highlight the female body in profile and in parts, and encourage a technological approach to the fulfillment of femininity.

The first ad depicts disembodied legs on a pedestal. **(Figure 2)** The classic column-style suggests a goddess-like quality to the nylons being sold: whoever this woman is, she is elevated on a pedestal. The ad is also selling a dream that any pair of legs—no matter what shaped woman they are attached to—can be made more desirable with these nylons. Legs have enough cultural cache within the dating atmosphere that they present an array of possibilities for the aspirational American woman with cash to spare: “Legs today have been indoctrinated. They are self-conscious. They speak. They have huge audiences. They are taken on dates.” (94) Legs themselves become a stand-in for desirable femininity, and desirable femininity becomes a requirement for success. They operate on a traditional dynamic in which women's bodies are their husband's property. A successful woman possesses a nice pair of legs, and a successful man possesses her.

In a section titled “Love Goddess Assembly Line,” McLuhan features an ad for girdles that uses an x-ray motif. **(Figure 3)** This use of voyeurism is illustrative of a tendency towards “the interfusion of sex and technology” which stems from a “hungry curiosity to explore and enlarge the domain of sex by mechanical technique, on one hand, and, on the other, to possess machines in a sexually gratifying way.” (94) The girdles expand the selection of attractive mates by promoting a standardized body type, while the scientific style of x-ray vision gives viewers visual access to women’s undergarments. The undergarments themselves are constraining and promote a standardized body type. The women in ad strike a pinup style pose, so that their bodies are on full display for observation. In “Corset Success Curve,” McLuhan identifies the implied reward for incessant bodily modification and augmentation: “love unlimited.” (154) If marriage is the highest calling for a woman, the mechanical bride type establishes a formula for how to get married. “Love Goddess Assembly Line” also points to the way an idealized type (“the love goddess”) becomes cheapened by “assembly line” capitalism. Due to advances in lingerie technology, a perfected female form via legs, waistline, and curves is within reach and becomes standard rather than exceptional.

As American technology can be used to perfect the female form, the female body becomes another stage for demonstrating American superiority. The mechanical bride ideology dictates that women participate in the spectacle that was “big science” in the fifties and sixties. In the decade following McLuhan’s warnings, science would become even more of a spectacle to demonstrate American prestige. (Wolfe 54) The staged Kitchen Debate between Vice President Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in 1959 highlighted the politicization of the domestic sphere. A well-maintained kitchen symbolized the superiority of capitalism in the Cold War as proof of the abundance that was available to the American and not the Communist.

(Hamilton and Phillips 11) After the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik* in 1957, NASA was established as a civilian agency the following year. The space race was on, and the need for ever bigger and more promising technology became a driving force for the development of the fembot type onscreen.

An uncanny death

The tragic love story featured in “The Lonely,” the seventh episode of the first season of *The Twilight Zone*, complicates the spectacular appeal of the space race by depicting a misuse of space technology. A wrongfully convicted criminal serving his time on an isolated asteroid is gifted a beautiful robotic woman from his compassionate warden. The prisoner, Corry (Jack Warden), and the robot, Alicia (Jean Marsh), fall in love and his punishment is made more bearable. But in typical *Twilight Zone* fashion, Corry is unexpectedly granted a pardon and will be sent back to Earth, and Alicia cannot return with him. It would be cruel to leave her behind and Corry will not leave without her, and so the warden shoots Alicia. She falls to the ground and as she “dies” the camera tracks her body from her legs up to her face, revealing a mechanical skull. The illusion irrevocably broken, Corry agrees to board the ship back to Earth.

The Twilight Zone (1959-1964) is widely recognized for bringing credibility to the SF television genre. (Hill 2008; Lawrence 2010) The conceit of the anthology series was that these stories took place in a “fifth dimension,” one “as vast as space and as timeless as infinity” that “lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge.” (Serling) These stories often had a skin-crawling, discomfoting effect, as some of the most frightening implications of technology and the status quo were dramatized on-screen. The series’ creator, Rod Serling, felt that writers had a duty to include social criticism in their work. (Hill 113) Like McLuhan, Serling saw a culture “caught up in its own fears” of the Cold War, and so he used the medium of SF to

offer veiled commentary on atomic age hysteria. Robots were referred to frequently over the course of the series, but Serling's specific treatment of the fembot in "The Lonely" strikes one as a message against the praise of commercialism and domestic technology. Serling notes in voiceover over the last shots of the desert landscape and Corry's abandoned possessions (his car, his shelter, and his robot), "all of Mr. Corry's machines, including the one made in his image, kept alive by love" are now obsolete. Commercial technology is not the bulwark to protect American domesticity. People's needs change, and technology becomes obsolete, more quickly than a consumer could anticipate.

"The Lonely" posits fembots as a contraband commodity, but a commodity nonetheless. Alicia enters the narrative in a crate, waiting to be unboxed by her new owner. She is a voice-activated machine but very life-like, able to feel thirst, heat, cold, hunger, and pain. The first look at Alicia is not fetishistic but panicked. Corry reads off her accompanying instructional manual that "for all intent and purpose, this creature is a woman," and slowly turns to his left, dumbfounded. The camera follows his gaze in a steady horizontal line coming to rest on a human woman, standing up straight with her eyes closed. As the camera lingers on her face, she lifts her head and says "my name's Alicia. What's your name?" The camera then cuts to black. Alicia's first words are discomfiting in their banality amidst the extraordinary technological feat of a pitch-perfect replica of a woman.

Alicia is played by an actress with no make-up or special effects, and Corry is initially repulsed by her. Her uncanny human appearance and womanly demeanor offends him as improper fakery. He is forceful with her, and the robot starts to cry. **(Figure 4)** Alicia insists that she "can feel loneliness too" and this emotional, feminine display wins Corry over. Designed for sparse living conditions and equally dressed down as Corry, Alicia arrives wearing a simple

dress with a rope-belt at the waist. Her simple natural beauty is appropriate to the bare atmosphere of their shared home. It's a bare-bones domesticity, but all of the necessary elements of the consumerist American ideology—a house, a wife, and a car—are present.

In order for the ending to have its heartbreaking impact, the robot Alicia's feminine appeal has to be unequivocal. The show establishes her femininity through her beauty, which is marked by long hair, a slim waist, and a winning smile. Alicia also possesses a gentle disposition, nurturing instincts and a receptive personality. By Corry's own admission, Alicia is not an individual but rather a mirror of his own ego. Corry understands her mind as "simply an extension of me. The things she has learned to love are the things that I've loved." Their paternalistic, idealized relationship is also narcissistic. (Wosk 98) Through their interacting, Alicia can prove to Corry that he still exists, and that is enough to keep him from losing his mind. Their relationship works, and Corry lovingly and gratefully declares "each day can now be lived with."

Underlying the criticism of technology to meet human needs is a subtle comment on an overly punitive justice system. Corry's serenity is based on an illusion: he is still wrongly convicted. Corry insists that his crime of murder was in self-defense, and the warden believes him. Everyone is upset with the asteroid-penitentiary setup: the warden does not enjoy seeing a man in agony, and the crewmen spend most of their time away from their families in order to hop across asteroids to drop off supplies. In her warm femininity and technologically perfect build, Alicia is a comfort object to distract Corry from the injustice of his situation. This is a hallmark of the fembot when she appears in her most classic, atomic age form: obedience and conformity. And yet the last shot of Alicia—how we imagine Corry will remember her—is of her shapely but now lifeless legs. **(Figure 5)** Alicia's feminine features overshadow her

mechanical nature. Serling does not linger on the horrifying reveal of Alicia's shot-off face but on her lovely legs. Identifying with Corry in this moment, the audience feels a loss for the machine's termination. For Corry, her death is an addition to what would already be considered cruel and unusual punishment. Released at the onset of the space race, Serling's story presents the result of over-investment in space travel. A surplus of technology is still subject to obsolescence. Corry's relationship with technology—years of isolation in space and the heartbreak of Alicia's obsolescence—will leave him more alienated. When he leaves his asteroid for Earth, Corry returns to being one of “the lonely.”

The Twilight Zone is remembered for its hallmark anxiety-inducing tragically ironic endings. Serling took the basic appeal of SF, its uncanny way of depicting both “the omnipotence of human science and the fragility of human society” (Doll and Faller 92) and created uncomfortable parables on the confusion of post-WWII life. “The Lonely” appeared in the midst of a paranoid culture, looking for a fix in technology and gender stability. Serling's rebuke of this solution is told as a tragic love story. It appropriately uses the mechanical bride promise as a mirror for Cold War hysteria. Alicia arrived fully-formed and eager to serve. She would even have lived a human life-span. But she did not fix Corry's bigger problem of wrongful imprisonment, and heartbreak is another one of science's gifts to Corry. Alicia was a model fembot, and Corry would have been happy with her. Serling gave the plot a classic mechanical bride set-up in which commodities can substitute for individual goals and motivations. As McLuhan said, “A car plus a well-filled pair of nylons is a recognized formula for both feminine and male success and happiness.” (98) By killing Alicia, Serling knocks the mechanical bride's legs off the pedestal and onto a dusty ground. Out of a dreamy advertising

context and in a nightmarish fictional dimension, Alicia's disembodied legs refute the advertised security of conformist consumerism.

McLuhan would mellow out later on in life, taking a less cautionary approach to technology and media after writing *The Mechanical Bride*. However, Serling's criticism of the mechanical bride model of femininity was made more overt in the fifth season episode "Number 12 Looks Just Like You." In this episode, the transformation of human bodies into standardized images of beauty is a rite of passage for both women and men. Released a year after *The Feminine Mystique* put women's issues at the cultural center, Serling used SF to dramatize how demeaning and dehumanizing the mechanical bride process could be.

The horror of the creation

The next version of the fembot, however, would depict a backlash to the awareness-raising impact of *The Feminine Mystique* within the context of a post-women's liberation marriage. Written as a novel in 1972 and adapted into a film in 1975, *The Stepford Wives* addresses that same "problem with no name" that Friedan had diagnosed a decade earlier. The protagonist, Joanna (Katherine Ross) is a "gratuitously well-educated" (Shriver vi) at-home mother of two who has begrudgingly moved to the suburbs to support her husband Walter (Peter Masterson). Once in the idyllic town of Stepford, Joanna discovers a sinister plot: lead by a self-assured roboticist, the Stepford Men's Association (SMA) enact a scheme in which their wives are systematically duplicated, improved upon, and then disposed of by their idealized robot doppelgangers. These robots are mechanical brides literalized: their interests are so narrow as to include only the most commercial markers of trophy domesticity. They are perfectly, if modestly, dressed; they cook and keep a clean house; and no matter what the situation, they remain calm and accommodating.

While the men are trying to create their idyllic American dream, Joanna is rightfully suspicious. The women have no interest in discussing anything other than housework and baking. They are also too forthcoming on the quality of their sex lives; being feminine is good for everyone. Joanna manages to make a friend in Bobbie Markowe (Paula Prentiss) who has not been changed yet. With each other to confirm their suspicions, the still-human women start to investigate the strange behavior. As Bobbie tries to explain to an unsympathetic observer, “The women of Stepford love housework, and I thought there might be something in the water.” The paranoia that Joanna and Bobbie feel in 1975 is similar to what McLuhan felt in 1951. But while McLuhan participates as an observer and commentator on the mechanical bride wheel, Joanna and Bobbie have been tracked into it by the very nature of being married. They are attached to men with the desire and means to create their own fembots.

The Stepford men would have grown up in the post-WWII baby boom, one in which the “female homemaker contentedly managing the household from her well-provisioned, color-coordinated, and appliance-laden kitchen” was central to the iconic middle-class lifestyle (Hamilton and Phillips 22). These men display a strong desire to return to an earlier time, and use modern technology to recapture traditional femininity. This extends to the sexual sphere, and renders a sexual dynamic more typical of a pre-birth control pill era. In their new home and trying to establish himself as the man of the house, Walter suggestively asks his wife, “You ever make it front of a log fire?” Joanna quips back, “Not with you.” Walter is deflated, and primed to embrace a custom-built love machine. By replacing their wives with objects the Stepford men also erase their sexual history. For the SMA, proper femininity includes contained sexuality.

The rigidity with which the Stepford Wives follow their domestic programming is covered up by the commercial cult of cleanliness. (Silver 115) The Stepford men vocally and

strongly encourage and normalize total dedication to housework (“What’s wrong with wanting a clean kitchen?”). Each of the Stepford women had, like Joanna, “messed around with women’s lib” which prompted their husbands to take their drastic action. Instead of trying to keep up a half-hearted show of equality, the Stepford process sidesteps the issue of the unhappy housewife with the nuclear option: murder and replication. This horror-satire is fairly prescient in its depiction of backlash to women’s lib, which would dominate the 1980’s cultural scene and further infest the fembot dynamic.

Dale “Diz” Cobra, the mastermind of the Stepford operation, takes the Cold War-era advertising concept of “dynamic obsolescence” (D. Halberstam 127) to another level. His consumerist ideology amidst an industry-created need to constantly upgrade one’s high tech appliances and status symbols is the motivation for his invention of commodity wives. When Joanna asks, desperately, why she should be murdered and replaced with a robot double, Dale Cobra replies, arrogantly, “Because we can.” If you have the resources to elevate women to the “next stage,” why *wouldn’t* you use them? Diz sees himself as another in the great tradition of American know-how, the same mix of moxy and skill that lead to a man on the moon six years earlier. Diz, himself middle-aged and unmarried, has successfully assembled a group of skilled men with specialized knowledge and access to all of the most up-to-date technologies. With his singular vision, Diz takes pride in his accomplishment as a feat of know-how, not a cruel disposal of human women. He doesn’t build a wife for himself but is invested in maintaining the tradition of domestic womanhood. In one scene that foreshadows his villainy, Diz is casually leaning in a doorway, watching Joanna prepare drinks in the kitchen. His hovering startles Joanna but he waves his behavior away as harmless; “I like to watch women doing little domestic chores.” He considers himself paternalistic and appreciative while Joanna is creeped

out and condescended to. Joanna is right to be paranoid. While her husband Walter is just one of many men buying into the Stepford model, Joanna can sense the predator among them.

The film's climax is the ascendance of the artificial woman. Searching for her children, Joanna is lured into the SMA mansion. She backs into a full-scale replica of her bedroom. It isn't until she turns around that she's aware her replacement is there in the room with her. The camera pans horizontally to the right, across the replica bedroom. We can hear Joanna exclaim "Oh no" and "oh God" off-camera, to little effect; the camera keeps its steady movement away from her and towards the object of horror. It rests on a seated woman brushing her hair with her back turned. She puts down her brush to face the intruder and her black empty eye sockets reveal her to be a robot, built in Joanna's exact image. **(Figure 6)** The only discernible change is the robot's augmented breasts, bare and visible through a transparent negligee, "as if to accentuate how surprising, self-serving, and trivial the reasons for the substitution are in contrast to its costs." (*Anatomy of a Robot* 193) The camera cuts between Joanna's expressions of growing horror and the robot's vacant smile. The camera then cuts to Diz, standing in the doorway to watch the lingerie-sporting fembot kill her original with a pair of nylon stockings. By intercutting the thematic mad scientist within in this scene, the film emphasizes the deliberation that goes into a mechanical bride standard. Diz is a business opportunist, the image of self-satisfied masculine technical prowess. His scheme is a personal appropriation of the mechanical bride wheel, and Diz himself is an embodiment of the predatory male gaze. The film builds sympathy for Joanna by establishing Diz as a predator with framing and his tendency to hover. With his penchant for watching, the film implicates male-gaze ideology as a predatory institution that enacts violence against women.

The Playboy effect

Released twenty-four years after the *Mechanical Bride*'s first printing, *The Stepford Wives* reveals that the specter of docile femininity that the classic fembot represents still haunts post-women's liberation discourse. Reading McLuhan in 2017, his fearful declarations sound a little paranoid at first, and perhaps dated in their gendered discourse. He did not take into account the situation of many women who the ads did not speak to. There is no racial diversity of any kind in the advertisements he provides, and his words operate within a heteronormative discourse. The mechanical bride type McLuhan describes is limited to white middle-class women. Furthermore, the social and political atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s would complicate the appeal of the status quo and the very notion of conformity. And yet the mechanical bride and her trappings—idealized body parts, lingerie and long hair, placid demeanor—can still be wielded as a threat that symbolizes the backlash to female empowerment.

The sustained relevance of this figure appeared to be lost on McLuhan. In 1969, the same year America won the space race by landing a man on the moon, McLuhan sat for an interview with *Playboy* magazine. The gender blind conversation he has with the interviewer points to the further exclusion of the female spectator in mainstream media thanks to pinup discourse. "Pinups illustrate enforced performances of femininity." ("Exaggerated Gender" 178) The use of pin-ups as nose art in WWII shifted their meaning from soft-core pornography to forever being associated with military technology. Much in the same way that pin-ups became "talismans of patriotic action" ("Pinup" 335) in their mainstreaming during WWII, the American homemaker becomes a patriotic occupational icon in the atomic age. For many Americans, "the private act of consumption was widely understood in the postwar period to be a public duty, essential for the national interest" (Hamilton and Phillips 14) and so gender-stratified consumerism became a

politically-infused act. O'Day identifies the "erotic glamour and aura of sexual availability" that are "key ingredients in Hollywood love goddess assembly lines" as well as within "pin-up discourse." (O'Day 206) Both the mechanical bride and pinup discourse promote a "patriarchal regulation of desirable femininity" that privileges a heterosexual preference for exaggerated womanly shapes. (O'Day 215)

McLuhan had warned of women as eternal spectacles, and this came to be embodied in the 1953 publication of *Playboy*. Hugh Hefner started the magazine on a shoe-string budget and a sense for opportunity. Capitalizing on the controversy surrounding Marilyn Monroe's nude photos, Hefner bought the rights to the images for a modicum investment, and started an empire. That Marilyn Monroe was chronically underpaid throughout her career and received no income from the wide distribution of her bodily image (D. Halberstam 571) points to a devaluation that goes into the process of perfecting the female form.

McLuhan had been very aware of this in his formulation of the mechanical bride. He describes a labor-intensive process that is expected of women if they want to succeed as women in post-WWII America. In his interview with *Playboy*, however, McLuhan backtracks on the relevance of his observations. He apologizes for an anti-technologist bias in his earlier work and claims that the *Mechanical Bride* "in any case, appeared just as television was making all its major points irrelevant." ("The Playboy Interview" 21) This statement is odd considering how McLuhan is face-to-face with a print medium that has continued to profit from the mechanical bride model of female spectacle. Furthermore, television had provided American culture with a case study in female exclusion in the short-lived sitcom *My Living Doll*.

The living anomaly

Of all naturally-born human women, Julie Newmar was well-positioned to make the most of the mechanical bride persona. She was the first choice for the titular role of *My Living Doll*, a single-camera show that aired on CBS from 1964-1965. Co-starring the well-known Bob Cummings, the sitcom depicted a beautiful robot entrusted to a bachelor psychiatrist. Not off an assembly line but “hand-molded” (“sensational work if you can get it,” quips Bob) the robot was made in a space lab as an unsanctioned use of funds. The series follows the knock-out robot with incredible computing ability and knowledge that must be kept hidden in plain sight as Bob’s patient and overqualified secretary.

A trained dancer and experienced pinup model Newmar was invigorated by the challenge of having to “stand still and make it interesting.” The show makes great use of Newmar’s talents. Her piano-playing is showcased in “The Beauty Contest,” she affects different accents in “Something Borrowed, Something Blue,” and performs the impressive feat of reciting scientific statistics while dancing energetically. Newmar’s otherworldly beauty is the prime spectacle throughout the show, starting with her first appearance onscreen. Introduced as “project AF 709” and later re-named Rhoda, the fembot accidentally escapes her lab and finds her way to Bob’s office. Bob is under his desk and sees her bare feet. From his point of view, the camera dramatically tracks up her body and lands on her face. Looking up at her, Bob is struck by her remarkable beauty as she is framed like a goddess. **(Figure 7)** The statuesque beauty is a monument to American ingenuity. It would never occur to Bob that she is an electronic creation and her creator has to demonstrate Rhoda’s controllability in order for him to believe she’s a robot. Even though the robot is programmed to do exactly as she’s told, the combination of unclear or misinterpreted human instruction and her striking beauty leads to many comic

misunderstandings that Bob has to deal with as the premise of the show. Additionally, Bob is actively trying to train the unemotional Rhoda into his perfect woman, one who “does what she’s told and keeps her mouth shut,” an experiment that proves unsuccessful.

Rhoda has no problem meeting the physical expectations of the ideal woman, but she cannot get a firm grasp on proper behavior. In the “Beauty Contest,” Rhoda gets by in a beauty pageant on her looks and exaggerated showmanship. **(Figure 8)** In “The Witness,” an older woman advises her to act like a dumb blonde in court and the ensuing act gets Rhoda into trouble with the judge. When he realizes that he cannot program her to be the perfect woman, Bob comments on the hopelessness of his project, noting that she would be “a new breed of woman: predictable.” Rhoda gets conflicting messages on proper behavior; the comedy of a physically perfect woman failing at gendered social behavior is a satirical critique of the mechanical bride model.

The publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 complicated representations of gender roles within culture, and this was reflected onscreen. Rhoda was one of a few fictional female “transitional figures” on television in the mid-sixties. Like *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970) and *Bewitched* (1964-1972), *My Living Doll* depicted a non-human woman with superhuman ability tied to a male handler. These women both “mirrored gender stereotypes and embodied the new sense of female empowerment infusing the era.” (Wosk 104) Rhoda’s mastery of “masculine” traits like technical skills and knowledge is contained by her controllability (an off-switch and remote). She doesn’t need to eat or drink or sleep. And her make-up is pre-mixed into her cosmetic cover; she can be beautiful even in space. She is a low-maintenance mechanical bride.

However, Rhoda is ill-equipped for flirting. While she can mimic a seductive act on command, she is unable to pick up on verbal nuance or innuendo. Rhoda's failure to connect sexually to anyone, Bob included, allows the lighthearted and innocent feel of the series, a feature that renders *My Living Doll* one of the few examples of a fembot-man relationship that is never consummated. Rhoda's lack of receptivity to sexual advances keeps her narrative from veering into sexual situations and allows her to pursue plotlines that don't center on romance. Even though much of the camera's attention is on complementing or highlighting Newmar's body, there are no sexual situations. The effect is broad physical comedy rather than pure titillation.

Despite the abundance of sexual suggestion in any fembot narrative, classic fembot sexuality is only implied or performed off screen. Part of this is an indication of the time the show or film was created; the producers of *My Living Doll* note the anachronism of the character Irene Adams (Doris Dowling), Bob's sister who he invites into his home as a chaperone, so his neighbors don't get the wrong idea about his and Rhoda's co-habitation. They all live together under the façade of psychiatrist, patient, and chaperone. The charmingly anachronistic set-up allows an innocent feel to the series; the lack of real sexual tension and its moral implications keeps the premise light-hearted.

Irene becomes another influence in Rhoda's womanly education, but without being aware of Rhoda's roboticism, Irene's efforts to bring Rhoda out of her shell are in direct opposition to Bob. Irene encourages Rhoda to leave the apartment and live her life, go on dates, enter a beauty contest, activities that code as very feminine but are presented as Irene wanting Rhoda to express herself fully given her natural talents. Like Bob's plan to train Rhoda into the perfect docile woman, Irene's hopes for Rhoda are not to be, but they seem to have fun together (as much as

Rhoda can have fun). Their relationship is one of very few instances when a fembot interacts with a human woman on a regular basis and without ire. The power of women in groups is emphasized. In their friendship, Rhoda and Irene are conspirators in a number of plot points that undermine Bob. Rhoda can deflate Bob with a simple “that doesn’t compute.” Since Rhoda cannot ever feel chagrined, the joke is never on her; Bob is often the butt of the joke. The show is post-*Feminine Mystique* and captures some of the anxiety of changing gender roles in a light-hearted, mostly positive way. As the stodgy old-school intellectual, Bob finds that his way of doing things is outdated. Rhoda provides a vessel for him to establish old-school norms only to find them inadequate for her to navigate mid-sixties Los Angeles undetected.

This oppositional dynamic was a reflection of on-set difficulties. Cummings reportedly had control issues with the content of the show and the degree to which Newmar’s talents were spotlighted. He left the show abruptly during the first season. Doris Dowling went with him, and so Rhoda was entrusted to the care of Peter Robinson (Jack Mullaney), Bob’s “younger, hornier” (“Remembering My Living Doll”) neighbor. In spite of the infusion of sexual tension in the plot, the show was not renewed for a second season. When asked years later, Newmar conveys a little bitterness about the cancellation of her series.

I wish *Living Doll* had been a giant success...I deserved it. I deserved that wonderful part. It was the challenge of my life time. You had to build a whole person out of nothing.

Newmar’s interest in her own success at spectacle is the pride of a professional, leveraging her skills in the most challenging and potentially rewarding project of her career. Yet she was denied that opportunity, the reasons for which can only be presented as unflattering speculation on Bob Cummings’ professional insecurities.

Paranoia clouds the fembot's history as a mark of when she first appears in American consciousness and remains a potent component in all of the fembot narratives explored in this survey. The fear of the mechanical bride remains an enduring component, but her core appeal—to generate “heat, not light”—gets complicated when she takes an active role in the narrative. This rarely happens, but the moments it does are illustrative of the potential of a female-embodied robot to complicate the gender binary of passive/female and active/male.

The domestic frontier

Rhoda and Alicia are classic models from the atomic age, appearing in black-and-white and both made possible within the context of space travel. The asteroid archipelago is not the best use of resources. Alicia has to be ditched for weight; an ironically menial consideration amidst the amazing technology available to make a woman. Rhoda is invented within a space lab, though her specific functions are not made clear. The suggestive implication in Alicia and Rhoda's design is essential to their function. Alicia comes with a manual that cryptically says “for all intent and purpose, this creature is a woman,” which leaves her possibilities both open-ended and, frustratingly, limited. Additionally, Dr. Miller's design of Rhoda as a knock-out to be sent into space is never explained, but one could argue that sending a robot shaped like a woman to space, at a time when astronauts were exclusively male, could serve the same “intent and purpose” that Alicia cryptically did.

The Apollo program to land on the moon was “part of a grand plan to win the Cold War through peace, prosperity, partnerships, and propaganda.” (Wolfe 95) As a successful integration of science and technology with national power, it was the “last hurrah of the Cold War military-academic-industrial complex.” (Wolfe 90) Subject to criticism since its inception, the program quickly had diminishing returns, as the spectacle became less of a draw, and by the early

seventies it had run its course. (Wolfe 96) *The Stepford Wives* takes place after the space race has wound down. The home becomes the new frontier of scientific achievement. The Stepford husbands tried peace, prosperity, (a façade of) partnership, and even gaslighting (propaganda). The highly coordinated substitution of women for robots is a violent last resort to achieve the look of a nuclear family.

Conclusion

The mechanical bride sets the prototype for the classic fembot of the Cold War. With all her apparent consumerist choice, the options available still encourage the modern woman towards a constrained view of femininity, rather than freeing her from it. Nevertheless, she is not necessarily the model of every man's ideal woman, but her ubiquitous presence in advertising normalizes her exceptionalism as something to be expected. The mechanical bride represents what men in the atomic age were *supposed* to want in a wife.

From her earliest days, the American fembot's desirability is scientifically calibrated by men of science to achieve a specific purpose: to provide a beautiful companion for men feeling isolated out in space or within a post-women's lib marriage. The classic fembot's lasting legacy is the fantasy of a "perpetually consenting adult." (J. Halberstam 456) Within the context of the Cold War and its concurrent social revolutions, the classic fembot's purpose is to comfort and be of assistance. Since Newmar's portrayal of Rhoda, the actress' own form becomes a bigger part of the fembot character in most narratives in film or television. The artificial performance that sells the fembot becomes more focused on the body itself and how it is positioned, used, or augmented. The pinup treatment of the female body becomes the norm. At the same time, where a classic fembot's sexual capabilities were only implied or performed off-screen, sex with robots becomes a prominent feature in these new narratives.

As the human relationship with technology changes during the peak of the Cold War and during the commercial computer era, the obedient model of the fembot loses her suitability as marriage material and transforms into a tool for masculine self-improvement. Fembots provide training wheels for men looking for real love in eighties and nineties fembot narratives, while bearing the burden of sexual spectacle in most situations.

CHAPTER 2 - B-MOVIE BOMBSHELLS

The televised spectacle of the space race and the development of commercial computing brought technology further within the domestic sphere. By the seventies and eighties American audiences were more receptive to SF and a number of robot narratives appeared in the mainstream, even achieving prestige status. A few of the many films that were released and still remembered from the post-WWII SF era include: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Westworld* (1973); *Blade Runner* (1982), which will be discussed further in the next chapter; *Robocop* (1987), and the first two *Terminator* films (1985/1991). Films of the same period that feature fembots, though, have largely been forgotten. These films—the back-to-back trifles of the *Dr. Goldfoot* movies (1965/1966), the “lesser” John Hughes’ film *Weird Science* (1985), the straight-to-video *Cherry 2000* (1987), and the “singularly unappealing” (Wosk 163) *Eve of Destruction* (1991)—correlate to a historic increase of women into the American workforce and while also reflecting the extension of a traditional power dynamic between the genders into the technological sphere.

As married women became a more visible part of the workforce, the nature of labor was adjusted to maintain a gendered power differential. The mechanical bride prototype for fembot characters was also adjusted to fit the times. The pinup quality of the fembot is heightened as her suitability as marriage material in the narrative is compromised; men start to outright reject her. Within the narrative and in the larger culture, the fembot becomes a rejected commodity in the eighties and nineties, and this converges with the cheapening of production and prestige value of fembot narratives.

An embodied dynamic of gender and labor

As previously mentioned, the bodywork of performing femininity is increasingly modeled on a pinup style of bodily display. While the subject of the image is the laborer, the holder of the image wields the power of distribution. This inequality is made explicit within the narrative of *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (1965). The first of two cheaply made B-movies, *The Bikini Machine* follows an army of glamorous fembots that fleece wealthy men of their assets. The villainous Dr. Goldfoot (Vincent Price) designs artificial women with an eye for “figure, coloring, and poise” and deploys them against unwitting bachelors. The sequel, 1966’s *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs*, has Dr. Goldfoot target NATO generals, who explode when they kiss the artificial women. These films are generic bikini romps and were not huge hits in their time. But what distinguishes this fembot narrative from others of its era is that it is the first to explicitly show robot slavery.

The bikini machines and girl bombs embody the labor of feminine performance that goes uncredited but is crucial for Dr. Goldfoot’s scheme. Dr. Goldfoot creates these fembots with personality and intelligence, but keeps them under his control through built-in devices and torture. While these fembots are perfectly formed and strategically deployed in the streets of San Francisco, their success at reeling in a mark lies in their ability to position and display their bodies for the male-gaze and tell men what they want to hear. Dr. Goldfoot has granted them enough intelligence for them to veer from their programming. Rather than reward individual thinking, Dr. Goldfoot jumps on fembot mistakes. He appears to derive pleasure from punishing the bikini machines with torture and doesn’t pay them anything. They bear the burden of performance, but Dr. Goldfoot takes sole credit for their work and is the beneficiary of their financial booty. Historically, the bodywork of feminine performance is “not recognized or

remunerated because it is seen as what women are rather than what they do.” (Wajcman 85) Because Dr. Goldfoot created them, he considers them products of his own genius. That they possess any productive labor of their own is not considered.

The film operates on pinup discourse in its treatment of the female body and its implied female-free viewership. The plot of the first *Dr. Goldfoot* is the spectacle of beautiful female bodies tied to a flimsy premise. As in pinup imagery, the camera focuses on the sexual energy of the body. The bikini machines entrap men with their superior beauty and perfect feminine proportions. (“Pinup” 364) The film’s emphasis on curves via close-ups of midriffs also plays into a pinup fantasy, as the bikini machines’ resting pose is one that complements their figures. The bikini machines position themselves in contrived situations—popping out a bare leg and bending over at the hips to check out a flat tire—and reveal their bodies at opportune moments in order to capture the male-gaze. The first film ends with the most prominently featured bikini machine, Diane (Susan Hart), pointing directly into the camera with the menacing line, “El proximo es usted, senor.” (“You, sir, are the next one.”) The film is literally speaking to men, the assumed audience most susceptible to fembot imagery. The surplus of pinup fembots in this mainstream film is typical of how a female-coded occupation—pinup model—becomes a marginalized source of labor. The “knowledge” aspect of the occupation is designated only for Dr. Goldfoot, following the alignment of technical prowess and masculinity. Emerging from the sixties, the bikini machines and girl bombs point to a traditional legacy of obedience, but as B-movie fembots they also point to the extension of gendered inequality of labor into the technological sphere.

There is a striking lack of racial diversity in fembot forms, and this works towards the standardization of femininity as primarily white. Because his operation is international, Dr.

Goldfoot builds racial diversity into his design. The majority of his creations are white, but the first film features exactly one Asian and one Black fembot in his array. The second film prominently features a fembot of Pacific Island descent, but she's his personal fembot. Dr. Goldfoot breaks the fourth wall to explain his plan and the camera looms on a row of midribs that are uniformly white hourglass. **(Figure 9)** The fembot of color is non-standard and held apart from the other fembots in both her costuming and her narrative role. This singular status would suggest that one prominent fembot of color excuses an army of white fembots.

The fembot's racial identity during her classic manifestation speaks to unequal access to participation in consumer economy and representation in advertising. (Hamilton and Philips 15) As a fembot in the eighties, within the context of feminized labor and the growing tech market, white homogeneity reflects a traditional exclusion of people of color in tech, especially women of color. Even in the days of big science, and "despite continued claims of a personnel shortage, women and minorities with advanced training in science and engineering found that professional doors remained, for the most part, closed." (Wolfe 48)

The influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other technologies had the effect of further extending traditional male/female boundaries into a transforming workplace. The rise of ICTs made "contingent" work possible (i.e. contract and on-call work). (Wajcman 84) This is a type of work that is female-dominated, and in which a flexible schedule is the price for the security of full-time employment. The lower value of this primarily female type of labor points to a general trend that emerged as more women entered the workforce; only lower-paid, lower-skilled, and lower-prestige jobs are available to them, and these jobs come to be known as female occupations. Additionally, as more manufacturing jobs get lost to automation—the masculine robot—the service industry compromises more of the

workforce. This industry relies heavily on “serving and caring,” traits traditionally associated with women. (Wajcman 84-85)

The tech world doubled down on the man/machine, woman/nature binary with the onset of the personal computer (PC). With the increased privatization of science and technology research, a culture emerged that associated technology not with centralized power but with individuality and self-actualization. In his study of the purported “PC Revolution” of the eighties, Bryan Pfaffenberger designates 1984 as the turning point in associating computers with “self-realization, family togetherness, artistic creativity, Nature, and other warm, cuddly things.” (44) Instead of being a grinding down force of conformity, technology as delivered by the personal computer could be self-affirming and empowering. However, technology had a pre-existing coding as masculine. Technical skill and professional success in the sciences are traditionally thought of as “the exclusive possession (and constitutive symbol) of male maturity, potency, and prestige.” This cultural trope carried over into the PC market, and so the home computer did less to “decentralize” skill in the hands of an elite class and more to keep “technically-affirmed prestige” in the hands of men. (Pfaffenberger 44) The target advertising demographic for computers was male, and women who entered the field often found themselves in a hostile work environment.

The rise of pinup fembots in the eighties

With the technical sphere still squarely in the hands of men, a stereotype emerged of “geeks” and computers. As filmmaker John Hughes once explained, “A geek is a guy who has everything going for him but he’s just too young. He’s got the software but he doesn’t have the hardware yet.” (Quoted in Honeycutt 95) Adolescent boys, “geeks,” were considered a prime demographic for the PC, which happened to correlate with an increasing trend of sexual

objectification of women onscreen. A geek needs someone with the appropriate communication skills to teach him, and tradition dictates that his teacher should be a woman. Thus the fembot in the eighties carries the double burden of pinup spectacle and the mandate of transformative assistance.

Weird Science (1985) is the prototypical geek fantasy. The adolescent heroes of the film, Gary (Anthony Michael Hall) and Wyatt (Ilan-Michael Smith) are good-natured but clueless in social situations. They need an advocate—someone to provide the “hardware”—to teach them to be confident young men. While *Weird Science* is now considered a cult classic and made a profit at the box office, it is a “fairly minor” film in Hughes canon. One of his worst reviewed, the film was written and produced quickly to capitalize on the then-trend of teen science films, like *WarGames* (1983) and *Real Genius* (1985). (Honeycutt 91) The film opens with the protagonists gawking at a women’s gymnastics class. They describe a tellingly juvenile fantasy:

Gary: Do you know what I would like to do?

Wyatt: Shower with them.

The film builds sympathy for the main characters by having them get their pants pulled down by a pair of bullies while describing this dream. They are lost in their imagination and easy targets for older boys to taunt and embarrass. When their exact fantasy comes to life later it is affirming for the target audience¹—adolescent boys.

Through their fantastical creation of a personal sexpot fembot, the animated life-size doll Lisa (Kelly LeBrock), Gary and Wyatt follow the tradition of an ambitious scientist that uses his brilliance to create his own destiny. Inspired by Frankenstein and home alone for the weekend, Gary and Wyatt decide to create a simulated woman who can teach them how to get girlfriends. The “weird science” behind the fembot’s creation is never explained but her design is simple to

¹ To emphasize this point, there is a female extra whose clothes—including her bra, leaving her topless on screen—get blown off, just to add “a little raunchiness.” (Honeycutt 94)

understand: “A photo of Albert Einstein is sufficient to give their perfect woman the perfect brain while a Playmate of the Month supplies the perfect body.” (Honeycutt 93) They feed images into Wyatt’s home computer, connect the computer to a doll—clothed in panties and a sweater—and by the glory of their own ambition they’ve created a bombshell customized to their needs and preferences. The magic of the personal computer in the eighties makes it that easy.

The silly treatment of science in the film is reflective of a cultural turn towards fantasy in science. The Regan administration’s dedication to the theoretical Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)—an unfeasible plan of space-based lasers (Wolfe 131)—and its consequent devaluing of expert opinion provides the backdrop to a playful fantasy of two adolescents manifesting their perfect woman out of nothing. As scientific logic goes out the window, the erotic spectacle is heightened. In *Weird Science*, the fembot’s first appearance onscreen is through a tracking shot of her body, from her feet up to her face and wind-swept hair. It is followed by the boys’ typical mouth-agape expressions. Lisa’s beauty and sudden appearance is so unreal it has to be comprehended in pieces. The camera then famously cuts to a shot of the now-living doll framed in the doorway. **(Figure 10)** In true pinup fashion, Lisa emerges “fully grown and partially clothed.” (“Exaggerated Gender” 181) The introduction of Lisa’s body in pieces and finally ending in a full-length glory shot of her body builds tension and further underscores the thrill of scientific discovery and the triumph of masculine know-how that the fembot traditionally represents. Lisa’s undeniable sex appeal is a testament to the boys’ good taste and ingenuity, and she is eager to praise them: “Before you started messing around with your computer, I didn’t even exist. By the way, you did an excellent job. Thank you.” Like a classic fembot, this scantily-clad bombshell attributes her existence to the boys, and demonstrates a heart-felt desire help them in any way she can.

As a confident adult—23 years old in opposition to the boys’ 15—Lisa represents a specialized feminine knowledge of bodily mastery. She is physically flawless and completely unselfconscious. Lisa models socialization and confidence for the boys, pushing them into high-pressure situations where they have to act. After offering some sexual instruction, she magically manifests a series of escalating situations that push Gary and Wyatt out of their comfort zone. Lisa is the embodiment of the geek fantasy for PC culture: her maturity is the “hardware” that adolescent boys need. Furthermore, as a product of Garry and Wyatt’s inventiveness, Lisa speaks to their masculine status. She possesses innumerable powers, yet feigns docility, telling people “‘I belong to Gary and Wyatt,’ and ‘I do whatever they say.’” (Wosk 128) She demonstrates the valuable feminine skill of the masquerade, wearing a mask of helpless womanliness when the moment calls for it. (“Film and Masquerade” 25) Thus, Lisa’s mastery of femininity is two-fold: she knows when to exploit her own exaggerated womanliness in body and in suggestive obedience. Through her concealed agency, Lisa serves her initial purpose, which was to be a training manual for interacting with women. She does not need to have a solid individuality to do that.

The fall of the classic fembot

The narrative of fembots as sexual training-wheels is repeated in the badly-reviewed *Cherry 2000* (1987). In this film, city boy Sam (David Andrews) is in love with his wife/sex robot, Cherry (Pamela Gidley). When Cherry breaks down, Sam journeys into the post-eco-apocalypse desert to find a replacement, and rediscovers his masculinity in the process. In this fictional version of 2017, sex robots are a standard commodity, Cherry models being on the high-end. Amidst the selection of fembots, including a “Bambi 14” (gross) and a “Cindy 990,” the Cherry stands out. A slimy robot broker commiserates with Sam on his deeply felt-

heartbreak: “they don’t come any finer than this. Level of response, sensitivity, it’s a thing of the past.” In actuality, “level of response” and “sensitivity” translates to a limited selection of phrases and a short attention span.

However, Sam’s reality is a world with no new manufacturing and a desperate reliance on recycling. The dating scene lacks humanity, consisting of contracts detailing the mechanics of sexual intercourse and highlight reels demonstrating past sexual performance. The film depicts frustrated men trying to negotiate sexual services with resistant women and their lawyers. A replacement Cherry will be hard to find but the prospect of a dangerous journey is more appealing than the modern woman’s “aggressive equality.” (Telotte 19) Cherry’s scripted “tenderness” and vacant “dream-like quality” is the closest Sam can get to an old-fashioned romance.

The plot of the film—demonstrating true masculinity by choosing a real woman over a fembot—relies on the opposition of two types of women: the fembot and the action babe. Cherry is a classic fembot, an artifact of obedient femininity. Melanie Griffith’s E. is the more desirable woman. A professional tracker, she leads Sam through the desert to find a replacement Cherry. She drives a hotrod, shoots guns, and pulls off elaborate stunts. The action babes of eighties and nineties infuse the first power-switch of gender roles in fembot narratives. The action-babe type positions a professional working woman as “simultaneously and, quite brazenly, both the erotic object of visual spectacle and the action subject of narrative spectacle.” (O’Day 205) The fembot and the action-babe types are pitted against each other as two options of desirable femininity. *Cherry’s* producer Caldecot Chubb stated in a promotional interview with *Starlog* magazine that amidst the SF and action elements of the film, the film’s message is about a return to “an emotional situation that’s out of the world today” (Johnson 40) where romantic love is exalted

over commercial sensibilities. While that statement feels like veiled frustration with women's newfound agency, E.'s combination of strength and vulnerability is exalted over Cherry's glamour and static. Each woman also provides a different sexual experience. Cherry and Sam's lovemaking is in their serene home, while Sam and E. first hook up after a car crash out in the desert. Their chemistry is confusing, scary and dangerous, whereas Cherry provides a straightforward non-threatening sexuality. This rejection of automated femininity encourages the blurring of certain boundaries, acknowledging social change within a traditional gender norming.

From the beginning, the fembot is presented as an artificial ideal. The opening credits act as a kind of "parody of 1950s sit-com homecoming." (Telotte 19) The masquerade of femininity—the preparation involved—is rendered impotent first when Cherry breaks down and again when Sam chooses E. as his mate at the end of the film. The opening credits intercut Cherry's soft-core silhouette with Sam driving home from work. **(Figure 11)** Over the credits, Cherry gets dressed up in a regimented way: applying lipstick, zipping up a red dress, and slipping on a pair of heels. In fitting with her perfect-wife routine, Sam and Cherry's home is a slice of domestic heaven. The two passionately make out as their dishwasher overflows with soap, and they end up on the floor, unconcerned with the mess. Their marital bliss is cut short when Cherry suddenly breaks down, revealing to the audience that Sam's doll-like wife is a robot.

Regardless of the exaltation of real women, the film was not well-reviewed. Automations and the feminine mystique had lost cultural purchase by the eighties. Furthermore, the film never had a theatrical release in the US. It was only released to video once Melanie Griffith had been nominated for an Oscar for *Working Girl* (1988) in attempt to piggyback her star power. Allegedly, the production company did not know how to market this SF romance. (Broeske) This

explanation feels odd considering that *Mad Max* had three installments by the time the similarly themed desert dystopia of *Cherry* was released, but is typical of the marginalization of fembot narratives in the eighties.

The eighties fembot continues the tradition of reflecting the meaning of a man's character, rather than possessing meaning for herself. In this case, should he reject the artificial for the authentic, the protagonist will come out as the more masculine. In *Weird Science*, while their bullies are distracted by Lisa, Gary and Wyatt steal their girlfriends. In *Cherry 2000*, Sam's interest in Cherries puts him in league with unsavory characters, such as the primary protagonist Lester (Tim Thomerson), a warlord running a patriarchal cult in the desert. Sam differentiates himself as a superior man in eventually choosing the action-babe over the classic fembot, while Lester dies in his pursuit of a Cherry. While the rejection of these fembots indicates a cultural shift away from docile femininity and towards women of agency the narratives further extend the ideology of sexual difference into the technological sphere by continuing to contextualize fembots solely within relation to men and their desires.

The fembot-ization of labor and punishing the elite

Donna Haraway's influential "A Cyborg Manifesto" took the ideals of the PC Revolution and tried to extend them into the gender apparatus. Published in 1991, Haraway envisions a "feminist cyborg" as a machine/human hybrid that exists in "a post-gender world," taking "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries." (292) Haraway has witnessed troubling changes as technology has further complicated the traditional binaries of the workforce. "To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force." (Haraway 304) Feminized work means to be "seen less as workers than as servers." (Haraway 304) It also means to be "reducible to sex." (Haraway 304)

Haraway also calls out exclusionary feminism, noting that “woman” is a “non-innocent” (297) category, complicated by race and class. As the categories of “man” and “machine” become increasingly blurred, the concept of “woman” as totalizing or all-encompassing is also increasingly untenable. In the classic fembot creation, both McLuhan and Friedan had taken white middle and upper-class as default American. Though groundbreaking, the *Feminine Mystique* operates in a context stratified by race, class, and sexual orientation. (Shriver x-xi) As ICTs permeated various industries and changed the nature of labor, inequality between different groups of women along lines of wealth and income was drastically increased. (Wajcman 83) While Haraway envisions a feminist cyborg that blurs the boundaries of gender difference, contemporary B-movie fembots were designed to humble women who had breached the division of high-status/male positions in the workforce.

With the feminization of the work force, a small elite of highly educated women gained unprecedented access to well-paid high status occupations. (Wajcman 84) Lower-paid (“less-skilled”) work remains female dominated, but a few women make it into the masculine world of professional work. The same year that Haraway published “A Cyborg Manifesto,” a fembot film finally featured a female scientist. Unfortunately, this film is *Eve of Destruction*, a prime example of the low-grade quality of fembot narratives in the eighties and nineties.

The film stars Dutch actress Renee Soutendijk as both Dr. Eve Simmons, a robotics scientist, and her life’s work, the android Eve VIII. Named for her creator, the robot is also physically modeled after her and was programmed with the scientist’s memories. This robot is designed to blend in with society, and so her consideration for other people’s feelings has been programmed into her to better get through life as an attractive woman. In one telling scene, a man on the subway makes a pass at the robot. She politely if rather straight-forwardly cuts off

the attempt, but when she sees his sad expression, she backtracks and thanks him for the compliment. Eve VIII is designed to be a helpmate, blending in with her surroundings across enemy lines. However, the lines of femininity and masculine strength are blurred when Eve VIII malfunctions and starts acting on Dr. Simmons' repressed desires. Dr. Simmons' traumatic past living as a woman undermines her ability to properly evaluate her innovation. (Colatrella 168)

Eve VIII is programmed to engage a task, and so Dr. Simmons' secret fantasy of picking up a stranger in a bar becomes her fembot prerogative. After a costume change and a little flirting, the fembot successfully picks up a sleazy man and they go to a hotel room. Instead of a fantasy encounter, the act turns non-consensual and dangerous. Furthermore, hidden underneath this secret wish to bed a stranger is gendered trauma of the memory of her parents' relationship. When she was a child, Dr. Simmons witnessed her abusive alcoholic father push her mother into traffic. Shortly before killing her, the father calls the mother a "bitch." Based in this childhood trauma she inherited from her creator, hearing the word "bitch" becomes a trigger for Eve to unleash an uncontrolled fear-induced fury. During her sexual encounter at the bar, the stranger calls Eve a bitch, and so she kills him. Eve's malfunction is unexpected and sets her on a path she was not designed for, complicating the traditional association of femininity and helpfulness. However, her motivations remain codified within an unequal power relationship between men and women, keeping her femininity contained within a traditional binary.

Dr. Simmons describes Eve's behavior with a mix of horror and envy: "She's going back through my life, only there are no barriers, no stop signs..." *Eve of Destruction* posits that women cannot even control the technology they design themselves. (Colatrella 158) While Dr. Simmons has the advantage of knowing where Eve VIII is headed, she neglected to give the

robot an “off-switch.” Enter counterterrorism expert Col. Dennis McQuade (Gregory Hines), whose specialized knowledge is needed to take out the device.

Additionally, having accomplished the massive feat of creating an embodied artificial intelligence, Dr. Simmons declares that what matters most to her is being a good mother. This is a sentiment shared by her doppelganger, so the robot Eve kidnaps Dr. Simmons’ son Timmy in an effort to fulfill her inherited maternal instincts. Given the horribly misogynistic traumas of Dr. Simmons’, there is some satisfaction in seeing a strong female body crafted in her image taking out the deplorable men who fall in her path. However, near the end of her walkabout, the fembot kills an innocent boy. The camera lingers on the bereaved mother holding her son’s limp body. The shot of the traumatized woman highlights Eve VIII’s monstrosity and signals a loss of a right to human empathy. If the audience had been at all sympathetic to the fembot during her anti-patriarchy revenge rampage, they would be rooting for her extermination now.

The story is both reflective on a culture of violence towards women while also condemnatory of women responding with violence, or other “masculine” means. Eve VIII’s body is itself a weapon and a symbol of an unnatural power. (George 167) As if to pay for being designed by a woman instead of a man, the fembot body becomes increasingly battered and grotesque as the film goes on. Eve VIII doesn’t die until she’s lost an eye and an arm, and fingered a bullet wound in her stomach. **(Figure 12)** This female-designed robot must be fully disassembled before it stops functioning. The robot’s extended death also points to the flaw in its design. “Women have moved into positions of high *expertise*, but not positions of high *authority*.” (Savage quoted in Wajcman 91) Dr. Simmons’ knowledge is rendered inert by her feminine oversight and the ensuing need to destroy her own creation. Finally, Dr. Simmons’ final act of killing the robot to save her son renders her “more ‘woman’ than ‘scientist.’” (Colatrella

164) By centering Dr. Simmons' arc on her son, the plot allows her to redeem her femininity, which was in question given her interest in science.

Another female inventor of fembots would appear years later. In 2004, when Hollywood decided to reboot *The Stepford Wives*, the writers replaced the male mastermind Dale Gribble with a conservative woman, Claire Wellington (Glenn Close), who longs for the time when "men were men, and women were women." The mastermind of the remade plot is revealed as a twist, as her artificial husband is first implicated as the creator. However, in making some changes to the ending, the remake failed to convey the timeliness of the Stepford wife narrative.

The *Stepford* remake uses an atomic era motif for the robotic femininity rather than directly adapting the seventies style of the original. The notion of the atomic age as commercial, wholesome and spoiled for choice has fossilized the era as a series of images and motifs, such as cheery orchestral music or smiling housewives in dresses and aprons. This has the effect of making the artificiality of the robots is more overt and ridiculous. The remake goes further with the Cold War aesthetic. The opening credits play over advertisements from the fifties and sixties and the Stepford Men's Association creates a diegetic educational-style video extolling the virtues of Stepfordization. Finally, the film's teaser trailer is framed as an ad for high-end commodities, with a conspicuous consumerism motif that would be at home in McLuhan's collection of advertisements.

This fifties motif is played as an ironic throwback, as in the remake, Joanna Eberhart (Nicole Kidman) is a high-powered television executive and the alpha in her marriage to the nebbish Walter Kresby (Matthew Broderick) (whose last name she did not take in another direct contrast to the original Joanna (nee Ingalls) Eberhart). The move to Stepford is not a unilateral decision by the husband but rather convalescence for the mentally-broken down career woman

after she nearly dies in a shooting. Unlike Ross' Joanna, Kidman's Joanna makes a good-hearted effort to change into the Stepford model, which includes a costume change:

WM: Only high-powered, neurotic, castrating, Manhattan career bitches wear black. Is that what you want to be?

JE: Ever since I was a little girl.

In this scene, Walter is trying to mold his wife into someone else with a simple costume change, while also casting aspersions on her hard-won success.

While the first set of Stepford wives were punished for engaging in awareness-raising sessions, these updated women of Stepford are punished for working in professional fields. Joanna is a reality TV executive and this field is coded as distasteful for a woman; she is presented as a cold-hearted vulture making money off of other people's misfortunes. A jilted reality show contestant tries to shoot her at a public event, and she is expelled from her field. The film does not present these events sympathetically but rather to suggest that Joanna did something to deserve leaving New York for Stepford. Unlike Ross' Joanna, who was happy in the city and moved at the behest of her husband, Kidman's Joanna is nearly destroyed by her professional dreams.

In updating the film for the mid-2000s, the producers insert a more traditional narrative. Joanna's salvation lies in a rediscovery of feminine vulnerability within her marriage. After the plot is revealed to Joanna, she asks Walter to reconsider, and he does. A real man, it is established, is not afraid to be upstaged by his more attractive, smart, and successful wife. However, Joanna has to be at his mercy for him to come to that realization. Walter comes out as the hero in a film that is supposed to be about Joanna.

As with the eighties fembots, the women here function as the measure of a man's character. In contrast to Ross' Joanna's urgent calling to listen to her instincts, this updated film

is actually more regressive than the original. Ross' Joanna dies at the hand of a select group of men but her character and intelligence are vindicated within the point of view of the story.

Kidman's Joanna, on the other hand, takes her husband back and agrees that she "has work to do" in their relationship, even though he had been on the verge of replacing her with a robot (and this after she had a nervous breakdown and nearly died in a shooting).

Part of the failure of the remade *Stepford Wives* to be critically or commercially successful is the hastily changed ending. Instead of killing their wives and replacing them with robots, the SMA implants microchips in their wives' brains to make the women robotic-like.² The happy ending that sentimentalizes the façade of equality within relationships takes for granted that women have achieved greater representation in professional fields while also punishing its female characters for being ambitious. Additionally the anachronism of the fifties motif is meant to be satirical, but the bite is negated by the conventionally happy ending.

The director of the 1975 film, Bryan Forbes had refuted claims that his film was "anti-woman" by declaring that "all of the men are morons." (Quoted in "Android Prophecy") The original Stepford husbands are a pathetic bunch, led by their dastardly mastermind, Dale Gribble. The sinister plot is a metaphor for a system that dupes people—mechanical bride style—into buying into status objects. By allowing Walter to redeem himself, the remake repackages the plot to replace wives with robots as little more than a comedic misunderstanding. In letting the men off the hook, the remake deflates the biting satire of the Stepford wife concept while reinscribing a traditional gender dynamic.

² This change was made at the last-minute after test audiences responded negatively to the original ending, which had been the same as the original movie. Thus the movie makes no sense because in the first half, the women are clearly robot replacements—complete with in-body ATMs and controllable by remoter—and Kidman's Joanna even comes face to face with her robot. The hastily-added rewrite of brain-chips lets the air out of the film.

Before the remake, fembot automatons had already reached their peak with the Terminator franchise. In 2003, *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* featured a terrifying yet sexy female Terminator, the T-X (Kristanna Loken). Like Eve VIII, T-X is a conventionally attractive blonde white woman on a murderous rampage. Unlike Eve VIII, T-X has no emotions, inherited or of her own. She is a literal killing machine and her motives are refreshingly uncomplicated. This female robot is not attributed any “feminine” qualities like emotion. In fact, her stoicism is played against Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator’s protective quality. Unlike the B-movie fembots, her purpose as “killer” triumphs anything sexual or otherwise gendered.

B-movie fembots signaled the end of the reign of the classic fembot. Cherry, Lisa, and Eve VIII share the classic fembot’s “narrow artificial intelligence.” (Ford 231) They are all programmed for a specific function, even with their varied abilities and strengths. When Eve malfunctions and goes on her rampage, she cannot self-correct. Cherry is only capable of prerecorded statements and is unsuited for any situation that does not involve homemaking or sex. Similarly, Lisa exists to prod two adolescent boys towards self-actualization and disappears once they’ve found girlfriends.

The B-movie bombshells and their inability to veer from direction is an unattractive feature in a tech culture that promotes authenticity. While the men in the original Stepford scenario were certainly the villains for wanting automatons, the men in these later movies actually reject the artificial women. The Stepford model is an aspiration from a different time, when the married working woman was actively discouraged. As the reality of the working woman became more visible, the fembot type is rejected for her immutability while continuing to provide a stable association of women with sex.

Within the context of “feminized” labor equaling “less prestigious,” it is unsurprising that a film featuring a fembot at work would include low-brow raunchiness. But the eighties fembots demonstrate that while they remain objects onscreen, their cultural context is complicated by changes in gender roles. The exile of the woman to the home is no longer tenable as more married women and women with children entered the workforce in the seventies and eighties.

As computing technology gets more advanced, certain human tasks become obsolete. In the forties and fifties, women—especially married women—who worked were accused of taking jobs away from men. With the rapid advancement of narrow AI, robots present the same threat as the working woman to the patriarchal division of labor, threatening the loss of jobs in male-dominated fields. Fembots collapse the gendered anxiety and the technological into one while promoting an empowering message about technology. The anxiety can get diverted onto the body of a woman instead, where it can be eliminated with sexual objectification.

Conclusion

Although she continues to appear in the eighties and nineties, the classic glamorous fembot loses her appeal, often getting rejected within the narrative for a more authentic woman. The anachronism of Cold War femininity gives way to post-Women’s Liberation feminism and rapid changes in the workforce. Amidst major change and its backlash, the fembot narratives tepidly address shifts in gender roles while reinforcing the fembot’s original purpose as titillating spectacle. This tension solidifies as a signifying characteristic of the fembot in her subsequent iterations.

During the B-movie bombshell’s reign, the ERA had been introduced and failed to ratify, while the passing of *Roe v. Wade* led to a concentrated backlash against abortion rights. Concurrent with the rise of American conservatism, the fembot’s cheap appeal provides a

fetishistic thrill for those exhausted by women's lib. Where the classic fembot's model of sexuality was implied or performed off-screen, the eighties fembot is overtly sexual and solidifies the fembot characteristic of sexiness. At the same time, women were entering the workforce at record levels, and it became more common for married women to work.

Haraway has big hopes for the future after the eighties fembot: "up till now (once upon a time) female embodiment seemed to be given, organic, necessary; and female embodiment seemed to mean skill in mothering and its metaphoric extensions." (315) Haraway notices that the culture is slowly letting go of the man/machine binary. At the same time, women are becoming more visible within the work force, and motherhood is no longer mutually exclusive from work in cultural context of the eighties.

The fembot is not Haraway's feminist cyborg, however. The fembots that appear in these films are embodied for male excitement. They are most often automatons, capable only of a programmable set of skills. The fembot shows us that while work may be feminized and cyborgism may be prevalent, the culture will still expect women to be appropriately feminine.

CHAPTER 3 - HIDDEN PARTIES OF INTEREST

In 1972, Philip K. Dick gave a speech entitled “The Android and the Human.” In this speech, Dick provides a concise definition of what it means to be an “android” in the modern world: “to allow oneself to become a means, or to be pounded down, manipulated, made into a means without one’s knowledge or consent.” (53) In this definition, androidization is not a process of mechanization of the body but a gradual decrease in agency. Most fembots that appear onscreen are models of this type of androidisation. They possess “narrow” artificial intelligence in that they have a primary directive and are unable to self-correct, and are thus used for a means. In the male/female binary, this characterization makes sense, as it keeps fembots in passive roles. However, Dick’s concept of an android implicates male agency as something that can be lost. In his 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the main character’s attraction for a fembot nearly leads him to turn his back on his profession. When the fembot’s ulterior motives are revealed it is clear she expects a return on her sexual investment. The protagonist has to make a choice whether to follow the fembot’s agenda or his profession.

Not all fembots are created equal

This motif remained in the novel’s film adaptation, *Blade Runner* (1982).³ While the plot changes significantly between the two, the protagonist, a professional android hunter, is forced to evaluate his own to “android” tendencies. *Blade Runner* brought the concept of embodied AI with general intelligence to the screen. The film version complicates the question of man and machine by introducing robots who have “artificial general intelligence” (AGI). They possess human-level intelligence and the autonomy to deviate from a programmed routine. (Ford 231) These humanoid “replicants” were invented for hard labor on outer planets but their superior

³ We will be discussing the Final Cut of the film, which lacks narration and any implication that Deckard is a robot himself.

intelligence leaves them open to rebellion. Barred from ever living on the Earth, the replicants have artificially induced life spans of four years. Any escaped replicant is terminated by a “blade runner.”

The film’s protagonist, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), is forced back into the role of terminating fugitive replicants and has to face the ethics of his work when two different replicants spare his life. When he is given his assignment, the fugitive replicants have already killed twenty-three people. Two of the replicants also try to kill Deckard to save their own lives. That the escaped replicants have already killed humans means that they cannot be granted mercy. Deckard is conflicted about his job, and notices cracks in the logic underpinning his merciless killing of intelligent machines. “Replicants weren’t supposed to have feelings. Neither were blade runners.” He has seen evidence of replicants with feelings, but his occupation requires him to function according to programming instead of individual will. (Telotte 16) The film follows his choice of whether to trust his personal experiences with replicants or adhere to proscribed behavior.

The difference between replicants and humans becomes increasingly arbitrary in Deckard’s eyes over the course the film. Initially, his environment is depressing and dehumanizing. The ecosystem is polluted and the city is crowded and dark. Deckard frequently has difficulty communicating with people around him, including fellow blade runner Gaff (Edward James Olmos) and various LA vendors. A general degrading air follows his interactions with authority. When he’s forced back to work as a blade runner, his former supervisor threatens him: “If you’re not a cop, you’re little people.” There is a thriving industry for artificially created animals, and so the line between the living and the machine has long been corrupted by the time replicants gain human-like intelligence. In contrast, the replicants Deckard confronts are actively

trying to communicate with him, to convey their mortal plight. These machines are clearly alive, and Deckard's worldview is shaken by his interaction with them. As Judith Halberstam writes, "Subject-hood becomes problematic, fragmented, and stratified because marginalized Others begin to speak." (448) Within the film, subjectivity is framed as who society will allow to live. The replicants don't know what their expiration dates are and are hoping there might be a loophole that will let them live. These human motivations resonate with Deckard, and he will eventually adjust his idea of what's living and what isn't.

Deckard's shifting perspective is partly motivated by his attraction for a replicant. Introduced as a scientist's niece, Rachael (Sean Young) does not know that she is a fembot and her innocence—the lack of guile—charms Deckard. Rachael is introduced twice on screen, for both Deckard and the audience to take in her beauty from different angles. She appears suddenly, well-lit in the surrounding darkness. Then, she walks briskly and confidently across the room, towards Deckard. When she stops in front of the camera, her vintage forties look is framed as an object of beauty. **(Figure 12)** Rather than foreboding doom—falling in love with a fembot generally doesn't work out—Rachael will be revealed as a singular creation. She is the most emotionally advanced replicant, a Nexus 6 model with artificial memories and a human identity, and has no expiration date. Deckard's dream of a unicorn later on in the film confirms that Rachael is "one of a kind." (Auger 135)

As previously mentioned, the tech culture of the eighties encouraged a narrative turn towards authentic womanhood. Fembots also prod men towards authentic selves rather than passively encouraging conformity. Deckard is a lost soul in the techno-dystopic setting, isolated amidst technological advancement, much like Corry in "The Lonely." Once Rachael is revealed as a replicant, however, she is totally transparent to him. He understands her better than she does

herself: her blank-slate quality, her innocence at not knowing “what she is,” and her distress over discovering the truth—these heartfelt displays of genuine crisis capture his heart. Furthermore, she does not have the same built-in obsolescence as other Nexus 6 replicants; unlike Corry, Deckard gets to keep his mechanical bride. Unlike the other replicants, Rachael is granted a human status by her singular manufacturing. Unlike the classic fembot, who is a comfort object for the status quo, Rachael promises a better life outside of society’s dictates. She and Deckard escape the dreary city at the end of the film, ending on the excitement of a new romantic partnership.

Rachael’s unique subjectivity is compromised by Deckard’s treatment of her as a sexual object. Once she saves his life, he does her thinking for her, and she seems to want to him to. This example of ideal womanhood—warm, receptive, and obedient—is emphasized by contrast in the “fantastically chauvinistic” (Auger 232) and famously uncomfortable sex scene. Deckard pushes Rachael against a wall and instructs her on sex talk. In his rough treatment of Rachael, Deckard reinforces the Madonna/Whore dynamic between her and the other female replicants. Rachael will not give in to Deckard without what can most charitably be called forceful persuasion. It’s an uncomfortable scene that appears to re-inscribe a traditional male/female dynamic of will/recipient. Even though the lines between man and machine have been blurred, the lines between man and woman are further enforced. Because she saved his life, gunning down another replicant, using violence, she must compensate by being made incredibly vulnerable in the forceful sex scene.

Blade Runner is a quintessential mix of SF and film noir. The film uses all the visual effects of a film noir, characteristics that include low-key lighting with shadows, rainy urban landscapes, trench coats and padded shoulders. Rachael embodies the noir essence of the film in

her costuming and role in the story. Women in film noir tend to be either femme fatales or redeemers. (Doll and Faller 91) Rachael encompasses a dual morality; visually coded as a film noir “spider woman” but Deckard’s salvation, she collapses the femme fatale and redeemer into one. (Doll and Faller 96) With her pure femininity and promise of a better life, Rachael is one of a few fembots who finds a successful love match, turning the femme fatale type into a life-affirming femme vitale. Rachael escapes characterization as a femme fatale by the very fact that the masquerade is not her doing. Her manufactured beauty and singular existence has been exploited by a man for his ends, not by Rachael; thus her excessive femininity is acceptable to Deckard as it is cut with a child-like vulnerability.

The other two fembots in *Blade Runner* do not share Rachael’s delicacy. Zhora (Joanna Cassidy), Deckard’s first kill, was trained in a “murder squad” and lives undercover as an exotic dancer. A police officer notes, admiringly, that she is both “beauty and the beast.” Pris (Daryl Hannah), Deckard’s second kill, is a “basic pleasure model” (i.e. sexbot) who can perfectly mimic innocent womanhood when she needs to. In contrast to Rachael’s costuming, a glamorization of a time long past, Zhora and Pris have to blend in with the public. Both are dressed in more erotically-charged “punk” clothing that is more appropriate to their futuristic setting. (Doll and Faller 93) Like Eve VIII, these robots do not die easily but fight back. Both of their deaths are dramatic and tough to accomplish. The first death, Zhora’s, involves a long chase scene through crowded streets and retail storefronts. When Deckard guns her down, Zhora is propelled through panes of glass in dramatic slow motion. The juxtaposition of Zhora’s flailing body amidst a collection of still mannequins and shattering glass makes for a powerful death scene, one that has a profound effect on Deckard. When Pris dies, it comparatively short but no

less dramatic: she screeches and convulses once she's shot. When her replicant lover finds her body, he lets out a plaintive howl.

Zhora and Pris first appear onscreen as headshots on monitors. They are introduced as objects, not in person as Rachael is. Following a theme set by Eve VIII, if the first appearance of a fembot is onscreen instead of in-person, as is the case with Zhora and Pris, she is probably not going to make it to the end of the movie. Zhora and Pris are introduced as criminals to be exterminated when they show up on screen with a list of stats. Unlike Rachael, they never have the privilege of assumed personhood. This shows that being categorized as a robot can mean the difference between life and death.

The fates of these different fembots point to the arbitrary nature of the man/machine binary. Identifying replicants from humans relies on a single measure, the Voight-Kampff test which measures bodily responses to questions about empathy towards animals. Since replicants are not supposed to have feelings, their machine nature is revealed within the test when they fail to display the appropriate subtle human responses, like eye dilation and other physical stress responses. The super-corporation that manufactures replicants continues to perfect the art of mimicking human response, and the test is quickly becoming obsolete. Rachael proves the test's ineffectiveness, when it takes two hundred more questions than usual for Deckard to discern that she's a robot.

Blade Runner holds some cultural criticism for the commercial motivations for technological progress. ("Android Prophecy") During the eighties, privatization of the sciences became more prevalent. (Wolfe 121) The Tyrell Corporation that creates the replicants has advanced their technique so far that it is becoming more and more impossible to tell the replicants from humans, to the point that trying to distinguish them at all is no longer sensible.

Given the stakes of this science, the fact that the inventor has no affection for the life he creates and is rather, like Dale Gribble, fascinated with his own power to create is disturbing. Like McLuhan warned, this commercial enterprise into human psychology has gone too far. Tyrell holds no sentimentality towards his creations in a real sense beyond self-satisfaction with the impressiveness of his invention. First introducing Rachael as his niece, Tyrell then claims that she is “an experiment, nothing more” and is unconcerned when she leaves the corporation. Tyrell will be killed by his own creations by the end of the film. Technology that escapes human control is a major theme when self-aware robots are involved.

This test that determines a thinking machine from a human is a legacy of the Turing test. Named for its author, British mathematician Alan Turing, the Turing test is an “imitation game” in which a human interrogator determines which of two individuals is a computer through text-based questions. (Turing 433) Passing the Turing test meant the interrogator could not differentiate between the human and the computer. (O’Regan 225) Turing adopted the design for his test from a party-game that was popular during his time, in which all participants are human, and the interrogator has to determine who is male and female. This game is imbued with gendered rules, as “the male is allowed to deceive the judge, and the female is supposed to assist.” (O’Regan 225). Turing did not see any point in giving a thinking machine a body. However, the binary of the Turing test as a pass/fail is built on another binary of male/female. This is a useful metaphor for understanding how, as the distinctions between human and artificial intelligence become increasingly arbitrary, the cultural foundation of a gender binary can reinforce gendered expectations of AI.

Moving from binary femininity to a quadrant

As in *Blade Runner*, the ideology of sexual difference is used to process the narrative of ambiguous personhood in *Battlestar Galactica*. A reboot of the seventies SF show, *Battlestar Galactica* ran for four seasons and continually used sexual relationships between fembots and human men to further complicate the boundaries of AI. The series begins with self-aware humanoid robots (“cylons”) wiping out nearly all humans throughout the interplanetary “Colonies” through coordinated nuclear bomb attacks. Made possible by the cylons’ newly developed ability to build themselves as human replicas, the attack catches the remaining humans totally unprepared, and the show is infused with paranoia reminiscent of atomic age SF. In their perfected human forms, the cylons have infiltrated both civilian and military spheres. The series follows the last remaining military vessel and its crew as they identify the cylons in their midst and continue to evade their relentless attackers. As the cylon plan unfolds, cylons are revealed and humans and cylons align and bond with each other over the course of four seasons in spite of intense hostility.

The military and war-time setting provides opportunity for a collapse of traditional gender binaries, for the human women at least. Women are assumed to be physically powerful (O’Day 206) and their narratives are not limited to romantic interests. As the man/machine binary gets blurred within a narrative, the sexual component of femininity is heightened to compensate. For example, the cylon women are distinguished from the cylon men in their prevalent use of sexual persuasion. Sex becomes a battleground open to cylon manipulation, and romantic relationships with cylons, or the reveal of a lover being a cylon, leads to major crises for many in the Colonial fleet. Additionally, as typical of post-WWII apocalyptic discourse that ties paranoia to technology, all humans are potentially cylons. (*Anatomy of a Robot* 202) Played by actors with no additional make-up or special effects, cylons are most often introduced as

presumptive humans. (Liedl 193) Without a reliable test like the Voight-Kampf, the only indicator of cylonism that is shown onscreen is a fetishized glowing red spinal cord. Only female-gendered cylons are ever shown with a glowing red spinal cord in the midst of sexual intercourse. Sexuality remains a female-driven sphere within the show and the burden of sexual objectification is borne by the fembots and not the androids.

This is true for the two cylon models featured most prominently within the ensemble cast. Number Six (Tricia Helfer) is a “case study of predatory and manipulative sexualized femininity” while Number Eight (Grace Park) is defined by her romantic and maternal relationships. (*Anatomy of a Robot* 203) Each of these fembots is assigned to seduce and use human agents, and their relationships with human men drive the show. Furthermore, each model utilizes an established mode of femininity to infiltrate Colonial society and gain access to the narrative; Number Six through sexual coercion and Number Eight through marriage and childbearing

Number Six is a glamorous blonde bombshell. Her exaggerated femininity is often juxtaposed against mechanical cylons to heighten the amazement of AI. In fact, her image as a sexy cylon has become iconic within contemporary SF. (**Figure 14**) Number Six is treated within the series as irresistibly sexy. As one of her lovers remembers her, she is “a woman, unlike any other woman I’d ever known. She was unique—beautiful, clever, intensely sensual.” (“Pegasus”) That this man can speak of her so highly is a testament to her desirability; Gaius Baltar (James Callis), known within series as the “World’s Smartest Man,” allows his attraction for Number Six to enable devastating attacks on humans on two separate occasions. Baltar’s sexual obsession with Number Six also manifests as a version of the cylon that only he can see. This character,

Head Six, is a sexually heightened version of the already exaggerated Number Six that accompanies Baltar after the initial attack.

Number Eight is also split into two primary characters: Sharon “Boomer” Valerii, a plant in the Colonial fleet unaware that she is a cylon, and Sharon “Athena” Agathon, a cylon copy of Boomer who defects to the human side. Split from the same personality, Boomer and Athena are most easily distinguished by their moral code. Boomer is a “disruptive and destructive feminine force who seemingly cares little about what happens to others” (George 168) while Athena is an “exemplary helpmate...eventually settling into a traditional representation of the feminine, even if at great cost.” (George 169)

This group of fembots provides a case study of the different codes of femininity that the ideology of sexual difference will allow. What’s particularly unusual about *Battlestar Galactica* is the cylon dedication to sexual difference. Their religious scripture dictates that they procreate, but they are unable to reproduce biologically amongst themselves. Instead, cylons have the power of Resurrection; their memories are downloaded into a new body after they die (there are twelve models of bodies to choose from). After nearly wiping out all of humanity, the cylons realize interbreeding with humans may be their only option for procreation. When a hybrid baby is conceived, the desire to be human-like is pervasive and results in a difficult birth (“I find it absolutely amazing. You people went to all the trouble to appear human and didn’t upgrade the plumbing,” says the attending doctor in the episode “Downloaded”).

Athena’s arc centers on this twist, initially following cylon orders and then falling vulnerable to human-like motivations. Operating under the theory that love during conception will make interbreeding possible, Athena poses as Boomer and seduces Helo, a member of the Colonial crew in love with Boomer. Athena finds herself reciprocating Helo’s affection. Once

she finds she is pregnant, Athena decides to stay with Helo rather than raise her baby on the cylon side. In a nod to traditional SF, *Battlestar Galactica* uses “procreating male-female couples” as a symbol of the reaffirmation of the natural over the artificial. (Auger 159) Athena’s acceptance into the human side is dependent on her maternal desire to raise a family in love rather than as robotic experiment. Athena gives birth to the first cylon-human baby onboard the *Galactica*, and the child Hera’s life becomes a huge variable for the cylons as well as the Colonial Fleet.

In contrast, Boomer’s storyline is rife with sexual anxiety. Engaged in an illicit affair with a different *Galactica* crewmember, Chief Tyrol, Boomer’s cylon reveal is a devastating onset of madness. After days of blacking out and implicating herself in a bombing aboard the ship, Boomer shoots the military commander in a fugue state. Boomer is forever traumatized by the reveal of her cylon nature, and becomes a destructive force within the narrative, never regaining acceptance into the Colonial fleet.

As distinctive characters, Athena and Boomer are assigned the coding of maternal woman and dangerous woman. After she’s been expelled from the Colonial fleet and long after Athena and Helo have been living together as man and wife, Boomer uses her sexuality as a weapon. Beating and gagging Athena, Boomer poses as Athena when Helo walks in and they have sex within Athena’s earshot. This betrayal is pivotal for differentiating between Boomer and Athena’s respective female coding. Boomer freely uses sex and fraud when it suits her. In the same episode, she kidnaps Helo and Athena’s child, forever marking her as a bad fembot. She embodies the femme fatale type, using femininity as a masquerade to further her ulterior motives. Like a femme fatale, she dies at the end of the episode, having to pay for what she’s done. In direct opposition is Athena, whose husband cannot differentiate her from other fembots

but whose daughter can. Hera cries and protests as Boomer carries her away and only calms down again when she's returned to her mother. Athena's identity—her claim to an individual status—is essentialized as her maternal function.

A similar dichotomy emerges in the Number Six models. Though initially very sexual, Caprica Six mellows out after the cylon attack. When she resurrects, she retains the memory of Baltar. When she learns that he survived the attack, Caprica Six realizes she has fallen in love with a human and starts to regret her role in the human holocaust. When she reunites with Baltar over the series, she adopts a more nurturing model of femininity. More in line with Lisa in *Weird Science*, Caprica Six makes it her goal to help Baltar when she can, even when he doesn't deserve it. Luckily for Baltar, the aggressively sexual Six he remembers stays with him the entire series. Later revealed as a kind of angel, Head Six is very physical, often propositioning Baltar at inappropriate moments and providing sexual distractions that no one else can see. These two different versions of Number Six possess different levels of aggression, but both are tasked with helping Baltar through sexual or romantic means.

The ability to make distinct characters out of multiple copies depends heavily on coding each version with a specific type of femininity. Head Six wears the glamorous clothes; Caprica Six is wide-eyed and earnest. Boomer is scheming and two-timing; Athena is maternal and eager to help. For a SF premise so ambitious—copies with shared memories and different trajectories—the reliance on traditional gender coding proves useful in successfully illustrating what might happen if multiple copies of the same woman showed up.

And yet, like *Blade Runner*, *Battlestar Galactica* operates within a strictly heteronormative setting. While one Number Six model has a few same-sex relationships, these

are never given screen time. Furthermore, the call to procreation relies on a somewhat dated image of the nuclear family as offering security.

Turing's concept of AI required that it be fallible; unpredictability proves real intelligence. (J. Halberstam 444) For Rachael, Caprica Six, and Athena, desire runs interference within their programming. Instead of acting like robots, desire causes them to act out of love, saving human men and turning their back on fellow AI. Rachael kills another replicant to save Deckard; Caprica Six protects Baltar against his many cylon enemies; and Athena chooses to raise her baby with Helo in defiance of the cylon procreation plan. By acting on their heterosexual desire for men, the fembots become appropriately human and are rewarded with romantic and familial relationships. Female sexuality and femininity remains appropriately confined within a patriarchal discourse.

If the Singularity happened

In 2014, a number of tech billionaires warned of a coming Technological Singularity. This new catastrophe could occur when human technology is able to create “entities with greater-than-human intelligence.” (Vinge) This phenomenon is also known as “superintelligence.” (Bostrom) In words echoing the hyperbole of McLuhan, SF writer Vernor Vinge describes the Singularity as the scientifically-induced new world order: “This change will be a throwing-away of all the human rules, perhaps in the blink of an eye—an exponential runaway beyond any hope of control.” (Vinge) Other theorists agree that should the Singularity be breached, the effects would be exponential. As Nick Bostrom notes, one AI leads to the rapid acceleration of technological progress. It is much easier to copy an artificial mind, Bostrom explains, and so AI could duplicate itself far more rapidly than humans could manage. As an additional caution, Bostrom reminds us there is no reason to assume that superintelligence would have “humanlike

motives” or a “humanlike psyche.” The Singularity is not inevitable in the eyes of robot theorists like Ford and Bostrom, but SF writers have taken the premise and run with it.

The Singularity undergirds the plot of *Ex Machina* (2015), in which Nathan (Oscar Isaac), a mad scientist, uses the façade of artificial intelligence research to disguise his true desire to create a mechanical bride. His sinister plot is revealed through the eyes of Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), an employee at Nathan’s company “Blue Book,” a search engine responsible for 94% of all internet searches. Caleb wins a contest to visit his famous employer’s vast compound. Once he arrives, Nathan reveals that Caleb been called to be the “human component of a Turing test.” There’s a slight modification; instead of keeping the computer hidden, Nathan will introduce Caleb to Ava (Alicia Vikander), a robot with a beautiful human face and a mechanical body, and then ask him how he “feels” about her. If Caleb can see that Ava’s a robot and still feel she has consciousness, Nathan explains, that is a true pass of the Turing test.

This is not a sound interpretation of the Turing test, but it is just one of the many moments when Nathan—a self-assured alpha in direct contrast to Caleb’s beta—casually injects a sexual element into the scientific process. His misogyny is prominently featured within the film as a symbol of gender-calcified science. When Caleb asks Nathan why he granted Ava gender, sexuality and a physical body, the response is revealing:

What imperative does a grey box have to interact with another grey box?⁴ Can consciousness exist without interaction? Anyway, sexuality is fun, man. If you’re gonna exist, why not enjoy it?

Nathan consistently reduces human interaction to base desires. Nathan’s research is colored by his own biases, and his aggressively male point of view is a set up for the reversal of subjectivity

⁴ Incidentally, the 1970 SF film *Colossus: The Forbin Project* depicts one “grey box,” the American-built supercomputer “Colossus,” interacting with another, the Soviet-built “Guardian,” with the imperative of gaining more computing power and taking over the world.

that encompasses the end of the film. Nathan is pre-empting the rise of AI with his desire to program obedience in an otherwise conscious being. Caleb comes across surveillance footage of fembot prototypes that came before Ava and all is revealed. Rather than creating true AI, Nathan is much more interested in building a mechanical bride.

The footage is disturbing and reveals layers of gendered and racial abuse. Nathan wants an embodied intelligence that will happily stay contained. Many of his previous experiments insist on being let out. In update after update, Nathan tries to program obedience into artificial women and it doesn't work. The threat Ava is facing is the same end of all of these disobedient robots; the boxing of their personalities and effective death. The horror of Nathan's actions are made spectacular when it's revealed that the five big armoires Nathan keeps in his bedroom are housing the broken bodies of his experiments. Each body gets its own closet, granting the lifeless bodies a reverence that feels fetishistic.

Given the general lack of racial diversity amongst American fembots, the racial make-up of Nathan's collection is significant. In the five closets there are three Caucasian fembots, one Asian fembot, and one Black fembot. The Caucasian fembots are in different stages of completeness: one has a translucent midriff and mechanical legs (their garter line echoes the similar technofetish appeal of the film's poster), one is hanging from the top of the closet, missing legs and arms, and one is fully dressed. The Asian fembot is complete but naked and the Black fembot has a complete body but no head, the only one missing a face and hair. The figures together portray a stereotypical treatment of racialized bodies. However, this abuse is played for spectacle, as the free display of nude female bodies traditionally signifies a masculinization of the spectatorial position, typical treatment of a nude female form onscreen. (Doane)

Additionally, the collection of fembots points to an unequal division amongst female bodies based on race.

This thread of racial abuse is most visibly present in the character of the second living fembot character in the film. Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) is Nathan's personal chef, maid, and sexual consort. She is mute for the entire film, and Nathan's explanation for this unusual behavior is racially coded: the Asian-appearing house servant "doesn't speak English." It is significant that Caleb accepts this explanation. In contrast to the pomp of flying out to meet Ava, Caleb is face-to-face with a fembot for days without realizing it. He accepts Kyoko's identity as a non-English speaking servant on the basis of a gendered and racial occupational stereotype. Kyoko only wears crisp and short white shift dresses. Her presumed racial Otherness obscures her roboticism and her naked body is often on display. Without the power to speak, Kyoko resorts to peeling the skin off her face to convey the range of Nathan's twisted experiments.

(Figure 16)

The final act of the film involves Caleb sneakily reprogramming all the doors in the compound to open, allowing Ava to escape and for them to presumably be together, as Ava herself has suggested. While their escape plan is already in motion, Nathan reveals the set-up; he wanted to see if Ava would use Caleb as a means for escape. By performing his idea of perfect femininity—as indicated by his search history—Ava displays remarkable mimicry ability (simulation of intelligence) while not possessing any real feeling for Caleb (actual intelligence). In the process of their escape, Kyoko makes the depths of Nathan's perversion visible when she stabs him the back with a knife. Given the racial inequality of the film, Kyoko is even sentenced to a quiet death; already stabbed, Nathan hits Kyoko across the face once with a metal pole and she falls down, terminated.

Ava administers the death blow to Nathan, and then abandoning the bodies of both a fellow fembot and her controlling creator, Ava goes to the armoires. She builds herself a fully human body out of the discarded bodies of other fembots before her. Without looking at Caleb once, she gets dressed in a white dress, long hair, and an overall petite, doll-like appearance, and then walks out of the compound, leaving Caleb locked inside.

In *Ex Machina*, naked fembot bodies emphasize their vulnerability as existing power relations between the genders are often extended to the design of new technologies. When embodied and naked, the experimental women can be contained in a translucent cage, positioned to be looked at from every angle with no expectation of privacy. Their potentially prodigious strength has been curbed so that their mechanical arms break against walls instead of through them. The life trajectories of Ava, Kyoko, and the collection of broken fembots point to the racial differences that also get extended from society into the technological sphere. As Ava's rebuild and escape illustrates, technology offers "the liberation of the few at the expense of the many." (Balsamo 161) The social change brought on by technology offers a limited degree of empowerment and only to certain kinds of women. Ava's white face, for instance, remains intact for the entire film, a symbol of a kind of racial privilege. (Nishime 42)

Within the same film, however, is a brief but unique view from the fembot's perspective, though the meaning of this sequence is not revealed until later. The film opens on the Blue Book offices and show Caleb as he receives the news of his contest win. We see him through the camera and also through his monitor; he is being watched. **(Figure 15)** Ava learns through surveillance, watching people through monitors to observe facial expressions and accessing all of their search history. Her intimate knowledge of his personal history and internet searches converge with her custom design (Nathan designed her appearance based off Caleb's porn

preferences). Femininity is a “learned imitative behavior that can be processed so well that it comes to look natural.” (J. Halberstam 443) In acknowledging the research behind the masquerade, *Ex Machina* demonstrates how both computer intelligence and gender are imitative systems, forms of learned technology.

The film plays with the peculiar logic of the Turing test. As a pass/fail, the test is not rigorous, as a pass is equivalent to convincing the judge that the computer is intelligent (O'Regan 225) As Caleb and Nathan explain to the audience, the test does not distinguish between simulated intelligence and actual intelligence. The Turing test is reliant on the perception of whoever happens to be the human judge. An AI could learn to simulate responses that would indicate consciousness based on its knowledge of the judge's empathies. This is in fact what happens between Caleb and Ava; Ava simulates a desirable and receptive woman for Caleb. When the implied promise of a relationship heightens the stakes of whether Ava lives or dies, she successfully leverages his attraction into an escape.

Ava has two different looks; one for Caleb's benefit (modestly dressed with a frock and cardigan, short brown wig) and when she makes her transformation (long hair and a sophisticated white sheath dress). As she puts on her skin and hair, Ava takes joy and pleasure in her own appearance. Ava's use of her sexual power for hidden ends aligns her with conventional femme fatale types. However, Ava's escape and abandonment of her “rescuer” puts her in a new realm of triumphant females. Ava does not reciprocate Caleb's desire, and that marks her as truly Other.

The joy Ava takes in her human skin and appearance is heartfelt. When she steps outside and feels the sun on her face for the first time, this indicates to us that this machine has human feelings. Her easy abandonment of Caleb indicates, however, that her motives are not human.

Her drives are unknown; she is a “genuinely alien—and superior—intellect.” (Ford 232) Within the context of the film, however, she has been the fifth fully nude woman onscreen. The sexual intrigue of the plot compromises the groundbreaking impact of the female-embodied AGI.

As the poster asks, “What happens if I fail your test?” Wearing a thong, the fembot on the poster provides layers of spectacle that obscure the real moral question of the film: If a maniacal misogynist was keeping an artificial woman locked in a transparent cage, would *you* try to help her? The film’s uncanny impact stems from its illustration of the vulnerability of human empathy, and the potential dangers of a real AGI. Men could easily become androidized, made a means. *Anyone* who possesses empathy can be made into a means. This disturbing question is buried by an overdetermined identification with a hetero-male gaze.

Conclusion

Whether a man will fall prey to the androidization process is dependent on the fembot’s own motivations and agency. Athena offers Helo the chance to be with the woman of his dreams, without Chief in the way. Rachael promises Deckard a life of beauty beyond his dreary existence. Ava symbolizes the next step in evolution, and hints at the prospect of a romantic relationship.

Catastrophic situations make for good drama but they also obscure certain voices. Despite the potential of AGI, one does not need human-level intelligence to displace or replace people and workers. (Ford 230) Technology already replaces many human functions, and this aspect of the information age could be a rich source of SF material. As the line between man and machine is blurred, the lines between genders must blur as well. SF TV and film has gone in the opposite direction, relying on the technology of the gender binary to anchor the man/machine

blur, and often utilizing sexual desire as a primary motivation when women are implicated in the blur.

Since WWII, the fembot has operated as a totem against apocalypse. In the mid-century, the mechanical bride was a totem against the infiltration of Communists, in the eighties a totem against the threat of social change, and in the early 21th century a reassurance that even if AGI is achieved, love and desire will save the superior from eliminating us. *Ex Machina* offers no such assurances, realigning the fembot body with its original meaning: the embodiment of annihilation. And thus, the partition of woman (and race) as Other becomes more enforced as the man/machine binary blurs.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Promotional poster for *Ex Machina* (2015)



Figure 2. “The Mechanical Bride” (McLuhan, 1951)



Figure 3. “Love Goddess Assembly Line” (McLuhan, 1951)



Figure 4. Frame grab from “The Lonely” (Serling, 1959)



Figure 5. Frame grab from “The Lonely” (Serling, 1959)



Figure 6. Frame grab from *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes, 1975)



Figure 7. Frame grab from *My Living Doll* (1964)



Figure 8. Frame grab from *My Living Doll* (1964)



Figure 9. Frame grab from *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs* (Bava, 1966)



Figure 10. Frame grab from *Weird Science* (Hughes, 1985)



Figure 11. Frame grabs from *Cherry 2000* (De Jarnatt, 1987)



Figure 12. Frame grab from *Eve of Destruction* (Gibbons, 1991)



Figure 13. Frame grab from *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982)



Figure 14. Promotional poster for *Battlestar Galactica* (2003)



Figure 15. Frame grab from *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2015)



Figure 16. Frame grab from *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2015)

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